



WATERMASTER PROGRAM FOR BRAZOS BASIN BEGINS

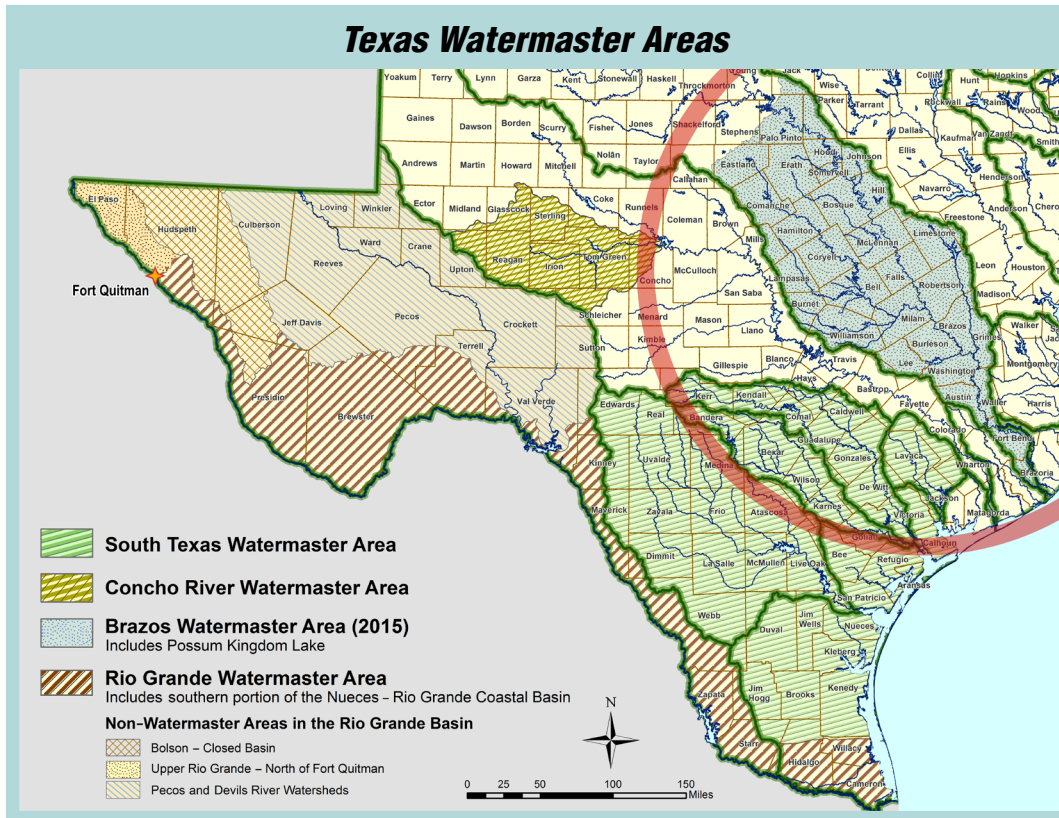
Better Management of Water Rights Benefits Everyone

As of June 1 the [Brazos Watermaster Program](#) office is officially open for business but that doesn't mean it is starting from scratch. The program represents more than two years of work from initiation to fruition.

Rights Holders Petition the TCEQ

In 2009, water-rights holders in the Brazos River Basin were subject to a [priority call](#) for the first time. Because water rights in Texas are primarily prioritized according to “first in time, first in right,” older water rights take precedence over newer ones. When water is plentiful, there are seldom problems, but during times of low rainfall, senior water-rights holders can exert their right over junior rights holders through a process overseen by the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality. When there is no watermaster, the TCEQ’s executive director in Austin steps in and manages the call. This process is often difficult and labor intensive—and can be adversarial. Careful conservation and day-to-day management of water in the basin can reduce the need for these priority calls.

On Jan. 7, 2013, 35 holders of water rights in the Brazos River Basin filed a petition with the TCEQ commissioners to authorize the executive director to appoint



a watermaster to monitor, regulate, and control withdrawals of water from the basin. Following a hearing at the State Office of Administrative Hearings, the commission directed the executive director to appoint a watermaster over the middle and lower Brazos River Basin affecting water-right holders in the portion of the basin from Possum Kingdom Lake to the Gulf Coast. This action of the

commission on April 21, 2014, officially established the program.

Working with Rights Holders from the Start

In the fall of 2014, TCEQ staffers from the Office of Water conducted seven public meetings throughout the basin to answer questions and to educate water-rights holders on what the new watermaster program



A Watermaster's Work is Never Done

The ongoing operations of a watermaster's office are busy, but establishing one takes even more time. Molly Mohler's time is divided between educating the public, contact with water-rights users, and managing staff members and budgets. And then, there's the driving. The watermaster area runs from Possum Kingdom Lake to the Gulf Coast—a long distance to cover if she needs to meet with staffers in Stephenville or address a civic club in Lake Jackson.

On a recent summer's day, Mohler began her day by handling some administrative paperwork and fielding a few calls before devoting time to an interview with a local newspaper reporter. Photos followed at the confluence of the Brazos and Bosque Rivers.

After returning to the office and a quick change into field clothes, Mohler joined investigators Nancy Ragland and Michaela McCown to load up the truck.

Backpacks? Check.

Rubber Boots? Check.

Sunscreen? Check.

Forms? Check.

Field notebook? Check.

Streamflow meter with measuring tape and camera? Check, check, and check.

After a quick lunch with the team (where one of the topics of conversation was dealing with snakes), Mohler headed out to check on the impact of recent rains on area water bodies. A survey revealed that waters are beginning to recede from higher levels seen during recent flooding.

Ragland punched the location of their next meeting into a GPS unit and drove to a farm where the farmer met the truck at the highway and led the investigators to the diversion point and meter down a dirt path winding through the rows of blooming cotton plants. Fortunately, the meter was on a pipe that extended into the now swollen river.

During a visit several weeks before, the diversion point was clearly visible, but now it was underwater. That investigator filled out forms and took photos to document the reading. Photos help investigators determine what diversions have taken place and alert them to when the limits of a permit are reached.

At the next stop, Mohler donned her rubber boots and assembled equipment as she observed McCown taking a streamflow measurement on Hog Creek. McCown secured the end of a tape measure to a tree and traversed the width of the stream. Mohler waded out with the meter to measure depth of the water as the sunshine filtered through the trees dappled the flowing current.

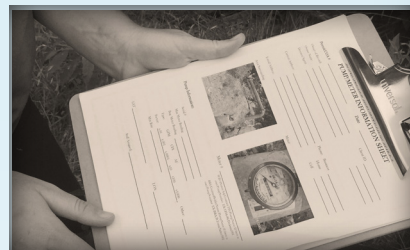
Returning to the confines of her half-decorated office, Mohler got back on the phone. Her boss was calling from Austin and there were voice-mail messages waiting. There is always another call to make. 🐾

would mean to them. Nominations were sought for service on the Brazos Watermaster Advisory Committee at these meetings.

The [15 members of the committee](#) 🗳️ were appointed on March 10, 2015. Their duties include making recommendations about water administration and distribution that benefit water-rights holders and reviewing and commenting on the annual operating budget. The committee can bring issues forward from water-rights holders for discussion and consideration by the watermaster or the executive director.

Watermaster Brings Expertise to Basin

Molly Mohler was hired on Jan. 1, 2015, as the first watermaster for the Brazos. She brings nine years of experience in managing the often stressed Concho River in West Texas to the new program. There are many similarities in day-to-day interactions with rights holders, reporting requirements and inspections, but there are differences too.




Top: Michaela McCown (left) and Molly Mohler take streamflow measurements.
Middle: McCown (left) certifies a meter and discusses the readings with the water-right holder.
Bottom: Investigators record meter readings on forms to track water diversions.

“Water in the Concho is diverted primarily for agricultural and municipal uses,” says Mohler. “Here in the Brazos you have so many more industries and different uses for water.”

Outreach and Education Key to Startup

Consequently, Mohler spends time visiting various industries within the basin to better understand their processes and water uses.

“If we discover there are times where they may need more water than is available, we can work with them to identify alternative sources, before there is a crisis. Good contingency planning, coupled with conservation, is in the best interest of all water-right holders in the basin,” she explains.

Mohler and her staff spend a large part of their time contacting water-right holders and stakeholders of all kinds, by phone and in person, [to answer questions](#)  and certify that the diverters have appropriate meters. She says some rights holders don’t even know they have a water right.

Investigation and Enforcement


Water-rights holders are required to notify the watermaster and request approval to divert water before taking it, monitor their



Mohler assembles a meter to measure streamflow.

diversions, and then report pump operations to the watermaster to show how much water was actually diverted. Newly hired staff members are being trained to coordinate diversion requests, monitor streamflows, and conduct investigations

where warranted to make sure the rights holders are in compliance with the law.

A well-run watermaster program can help rights holders coordinate diversions and work with each other to meet needs all the time, not just when supplies are scarce. 

Information Online

Brazos Watermaster Program
www.tceq.texas.gov/permitting/water_rights/wmaster/brazos-river-watermaster


Brazos River Priority-Call Area
www.tceq.texas.gov/response/drought/priority.html

Brazos Watermaster Advisory Committee
www.tceq.texas.gov/assets/public/compliance/field_ops/wmaster/Brazos/Brazos%20WAC_Web.pdf

Brazos Watermaster Fact Sheet
www.tceq.texas.gov/assets/public/compliance/field_ops/wmaster/Brazos/Fact_Sheet_2014.pdf



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